

# Echoes of Participation

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To discern the meaning of full, conscious, active participation, people generally refer back to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy from the Second Vatican Council, which says the nature of the liturgy “demands” this kind of participation, and people have “a right and obligation” to it “by reason of their baptism.”<sup>1</sup>

To discern the meaning more deeply, people generally refer back even farther to the words of Pope Pius X, who coined the expression “active participation” to express what one does with “the most holy mysteries” and “the public and solemn prayer of the church.”<sup>2</sup> Pius also wrote that the faithful would take an active part by “the use of the Gregorian Chant by the people.”<sup>3</sup> The pope thus referred to three separate means of participation: receiving communion (the most holy mysteries), taking part in the liturgy (the prayer of the church), and song (Gregorian Chant).

To discern the meaning anew, people could also look forward from the Second Vatican Council to see how the expression “full, conscious, active participation” was echoed in the liturgical books. That is what this article will present.

The task of implementing the Council’s vision fell to the Consilium established by Pope Paul VI, which in turn appointed groups of specialists to develop the revised rites. They took seriously what the Constitution had said: “In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, stitched into the very fabric of the revised rites were instructions and rubrics explaining how this was to be achieved.

Of the three aspects of participation intimated by Pius X, the middle one received nearly all the rubrical attention after the Council. When speaking of participation, the rites describe different modes of involvement in what Pius had called “the public and solemn prayer of the church.” These rubrics do not focus so much on the first and third dimensions of Pius’s explanation - the receiving of holy communion and congregational singing. Without question, these are valid methods of participation, and communion ranks as the most sublime. Musicians may be disappointed that the words “active participation” do not appear so liberally when the rubrics refer to music; however, congregational singing is an unquestionable exemplar of active participation. The rites simply did not echo the

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<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum concilium (SC)* 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Tra le sollecitudini*, Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *SC* 14.

connection between “participation” and “singing”. Still, no reasonable person doubts that it is there.

What follows, then, is a survey of liturgical books to examine how they adopted the expression so beloved by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Noteworthy above all is that “full, conscious, active participation” became a leitmotiv that resounds throughout the various movements of the revised liturgical books to this day.

The Roman Missal, chief among these liturgical books, sounded the theme in its General Instruction (GIRM):

For the celebration of the Eucharist is the action of the whole Church, and in it each one should carry out solely but totally that which pertains to him, in virtue of the place of each within the People of God.... This people, though holy in its origin, nevertheless grows constantly in holiness by conscious, active, and fruitful participation in the mystery of the Eucharist [*ipsam participationem consciam, actuosam et fructuosam*].<sup>5</sup>

The council rested the principle of participation upon a New Testament passage: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people.”<sup>6</sup> That is why the people are “holy in... origin.” They are baptized, and they share certain rites and responsibilities. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are distributed among this holy people, and when the diversity of these gifts is made manifest in their varying expression, they unify the rich praise that comes from the body of Christ.

The GIRM next promotes participation in “body and mind.”

[Fruits] will fittingly come about if, with due regard for the nature and other circumstances of each liturgical assembly, the entire celebration is arranged in such a way that it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful [*consciam illam, actuosam atque plenam participationem fidelium*], namely in body and in mind, a participation fervent with faith, hope, and charity, of the sort which is desired by the Church and which is required by the very nature of the celebration and to which the Christian people have a right and duty in virtue of their Baptism.<sup>7</sup>

Although some documents and individuals have drawn sharp distinctions between internal and external participation,<sup>8</sup> neither the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy nor the GIRM ever makes the separation so clear. Instead, as one sees here, the participation is to involve both body and mind - a participation that

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<sup>5</sup> General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) 5.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 2:9; cf. 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> GIRM 18.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *Musicae sacram* 15.

is attentive and corporal. Neither mode is more important than the other. Both are needed.

When addressing the significance of participation, the GIRM focuses on perceptible signs that nourish faith.

Since, however, the celebration of the Eucharist, like the entire Liturgy, is carried out by means of perceptible signs by which the faith is nourished, strengthened, and expressed, [cf. SC 59] the greatest care is to be taken that those forms and elements proposed by the Church are chosen and arranged, which, given the circumstances of persons and places, more effectively foster active and full participation [*actuosam et plenam participationem*] and more aptly respond to the spiritual needs of the faithful.<sup>9</sup>

This appeal to “perceptible signs” was probably one of the principles that led to a more generous use of signs throughout the liturgy: the multiplication of lay ministers in carrying out parts of the mass, communion under both kinds, musical accompaniment with extra instrumentation, large baptismal fonts suitable for immersion, anointings with a generous use of oil, and even the controversial use of additional symbols in the marriage rite to express the unity of the couple. All these were attempts to engage the robust participation of the people through sight, sound and touch.

The GIRM promotes regional adaptations to the celebration of the mass, but first it recalls the basic principles of participation:

The renewal of the Roman Missal carried out in our time in accordance with the decrees of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council has taken great care that all the faithful may display in the celebration of the Eucharist that full, conscious, and active participation [*plenam illam, consciam atque actuosam participationem*] that is required by the very nature of the Liturgy and to which the faithful, in virtue of their status as such, have a right and duty.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, conferences of bishops around the world could adapt the Roman Rite to enhance the active participation of the people. This permission and rationale were explicitly cited in several of the revised rites.

Thus, the GIRM echoed the Council’s call for participation. As one turns the pages of the Roman Missal from its general instruction to the corpus of celebrations, one finds this principle applied to specific celebrations.

For example, among the rubrics for Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, the priest is to encourage the active participation of the people. In Holy Week, the people are not simply to recall the events of the past, but to enter into them, so the rubric recalls the foundational principle of the liturgical renewal.

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<sup>9</sup> GIRM 20.

<sup>10</sup> GIRM 386.

...the Priest and people sign themselves, while the Priest says: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Then he greets the people in the usual way. A brief address is given, in which the faithful are invited to participate actively and consciously [*actuose et conscie participandam*] in the celebration of this day, in these or similar words....<sup>11</sup>

The Constitution's influence can be plainly seen here. The priest is to promote the active and conscious participation of the people specifically in their celebration of this day.

The explanatory introduction to the Paschal Triduum<sup>12</sup> carries a similar instruction for the same reason.

Pastors should, therefore, not fail to explain to the Christian faithful, as best they can, the meaning and order of the celebrations and to prepare them for active and fruitful participation [*ad participationem activam et fructuosam praeparare*].<sup>13</sup>

Once again, the vocabulary from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is evident - and for a similar purpose. The priest, using his own words, is to explain the celebrations of the Triduum in order to prepare the people to participate actively in them. As on Palm Sunday, the Triduum liturgies invite the people into the spiritual experience of the paschal mystery, the dying and rising of Christ. The liturgy insists on this kind of participation more for Holy Week than for any other occasion of the year - including Christmas. The whole Christian life is a participation in the dying and rising of Christ. Christians do so sacramentally especially in their observance of the Triduum.

The rubric for gathering people at the fire for the Easter Vigil also suggests active participation. The history of this particular rubric is especially interesting. In 1951, the liturgy of the Easter Vigil was updated, thus launching the modern liturgical renewal of rites. The rubric in the third paragraph of the 1951 Easter Vigil asks the priest to arrange the fire in a particular place, "*ubi scilicet populus ritum sacrum melius sequi possit*" ("namely, where the people can better follow the sacred rite"). That little word "*populus*" was the tiny wedge that cracked open the gate to a more active participation of the people. Rubrics in the past had dealt with the priest and the ministers - not with the people. But here, in 1951, the people were expected to be able to see the fire for no other reason but that they might "better follow the sacred rite." Today, they are not merely expected to follow the rite - but to participate in it. And not just in the rite, but in its meaning.

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<sup>11</sup> Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord 5.

<sup>12</sup> The Triduum is the period of time from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday through Easter day, but it especially refers to the three principal liturgies, including the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday and the Easter Vigil.

<sup>13</sup> Introduction to the Paschal Triduum 2.

When this rubric from 1951 was rewritten for paragraph 8 of the post-Vatican II Easter Vigil, it was phrased this way: “When the people are gathered there” [*Populo ibi congregato*]. The first words of the Order of Mass also changed after the council from “*Sacerdos paratus,*” meaning “When the priest is ready,” to “*Populo congregato,*” or “When the people are gathered.” The only difference between the opening words of the Order of Mass in Latin and the opening words of the rubric for the fire at the Easter Vigil is the insertion of the word *ibi*, meaning “there”. Very likely the Roman Missal paid tribute to the history of the active participation of the faithful by drawing a verbal link between two key sections of the book - the Order of Mass and the Paschal Triduum.

Besides the Roman Missal, which primarily concerns the celebration of the mass, other ritual books also put into the rubrics or the narration the principle of active participation. The Rite of Baptism for Children was one of the first revisions after the Council. It says,

If possible, baptism should take place on Sunday, the day on which the Church celebrates the paschal mystery. It should be conferred in a communal celebration for all the recently born children, and in the presence of the faithful, or at least of relatives, friends, and neighbors, who are all to take an active part [*actuosa participatione*] in the rite.<sup>14</sup>

Historically, the baptism of infants was conducted in the semi-private ambiance of a small room housing the baptismal font. Often it only needed to accommodate the four or five people required for the baptism. Now, however, “the faithful” are encouraged to be present, and more, “to take an active part.”

The Spanish translation of the same paragraph scripts out an introduction for the priest or deacon to say in these or similar words, concluding with this exhortation: *Dispongámonos a participar activamente.* [“Let us prepare ourselves to participate actively.”] The invitation could not be more explicit.

The Rite of Confirmation also took up the phrase in its introductory remarks. It calls on the parents of the confirmands to participate actively in the liturgy.

The role of the parents is also expressed by their active participation [*actuosam participationem*] in the celebration of the Sacraments.<sup>15</sup>

Prior to the Council, confirmation celebrations did not include the Eucharist. Nor were they “liturgies of the word” because no scripture readings were proclaimed. They were extended ceremonies highlighting the arrival of the bishop, the conferral of the sacrament, and the bestowal of his blessing. Perhaps in the past the congregation was primarily catechists, parents and relatives of the confirmands who sat in the nave and watched the proceedings carried out in the

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<sup>14</sup> Rite of Baptism for Children 32.

<sup>15</sup> Rite of Confirmation 3.

sanctuary. Hence, they perhaps had to be told after the Council that more was expected of them. Today the admonition probably needs to resound in the ears of the parents taking photographs and communicating with smart phones at the event. People are not to be spectators or reporters; they are to participate.

The Rite of Marriage borrows the phrase to permit adaptations by the conferences of bishops. As shown above, this interpretation appears in a similar section near the end of the GIRM.

In this regard, it is for the Conferences of Bishops:... \ if necessary, to adapt and supplement this Introduction of The Roman Ritual from no. 36 and what follows (in “The Rite to Be Used”), so as to achieve the conscious and active participation of the faithful [*ad participationem fidelium consciam et actuosam reddendam*].<sup>16</sup>

Even the Rite of Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick applies the same principle to a similar section.

The following are the responsibilities of the conferences of bishops in this regard: . . .

e. to adapt and enlarge, if necessary, this Introduction in the Roman Ritual in order to encourage the conscious and active participation of the faithful [*ad participationem fidelium consciam et actuosam reddendam*].”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the permission for conferences of bishops to adapt the rite is based on the principle of active participation.

A slightly different approach appears in The Order for the Dedication of a Church. Here, the faithful are to receive catechesis before the rite, in order to participate more fully:

In order that the faithful may fruitfully take part [*intersinf*] in the Rite of Dedication, the rector of the church to be dedicated and others experienced in the pastoral ministry are to instruct them on the spiritual, ecclesial, and missionary importance and value of the celebration.

Accordingly, the faithful are to be instructed about the various parts of the church and their use, the Order of the Dedication, and the chief liturgical symbols employed in it so that, fully understanding the meaning of the Dedication of a church through its rites and prayers, with appropriate help, they may take a conscious, devout, and active part [*conscie, pie, actuose participant*] in the sacred action.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Rite of Marriage 40.

<sup>17</sup> The Rite of Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick 38.

<sup>18</sup> The Order for the Dedication of a Church 20.

**Hence the goal of participation in the rite of dedication will be best met by instruction on the various parts of the church and their use.**

**This survey of rites shows how those who developed the vision of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy implemented and applied its call for participation. The revised rites hope for a spiritual renewal during Holy Week, catechetical preparation for dedicating a church, attention during the rites of baptism and confirmation, and adaptation in the rites of Marriage and Anointing of the Sick. Obviously, the books describe other modes of participation, but they echo the Constitution's phrase on these particular instances. These revised rites show the interest from the early days of the postconciliar church that people should participate, and why.**

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